Canada's 50-Year-Old Air Industry Made Nation

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Fourth Flying Power

THIS IS THE YEAR of Canada's golden anniversary of powered flight.

Hon. J. A. D. McCurdy, associated with Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, made the first flight in Canada in a heavier-than-air machine on Feb. 23, 1909, taking off from a frozen salt water lake at Baddeck, N.S.

If the celebrations of the anniversary was marred by the federal government's cancellation of the contract for the Canadian-built Avro Arrow, hailed as the fastest and finest-performing interceptor aircraft of the day, it has not detracted from the reputation of Canadian airmen past and present.

McCurdy was the first of a gallant band. Later there were those intrepid fighter pilots in the 1914-18 war: like Col. W. A. Bishop, VC, Roy Brown, credited with destroying the great German pilot, Baron Manfred von Richtofen, Raymond Collishaw, the repeatedly decorated ace from Nanaimo, and the well-loved Col. W. G. Barker, VC, DSO, MC and more.

Between the two great wars there were other flying Canadians of the same quality as the fighting men—indeed, many of them were veterans of the first or to distinguish themselves in the second—who pioneered the civil aviation field in this country.

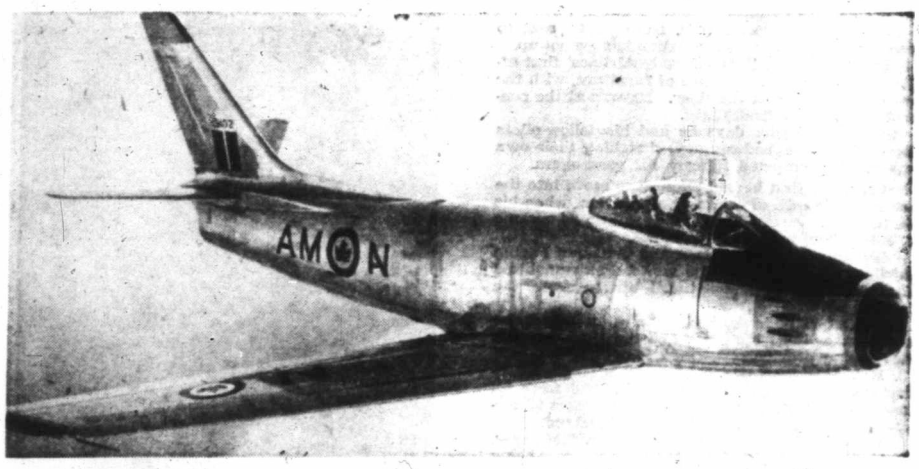
Ernest Hoy, in a Curtiss JN-4 (Jenny) was the first to fly the Rocky Mountains crossing, from Vancouver to Calgary, in 1919.

The following year the first international air mail service was inaugurated between Victoria and Seattle, and the Canadian Air Force was formed.

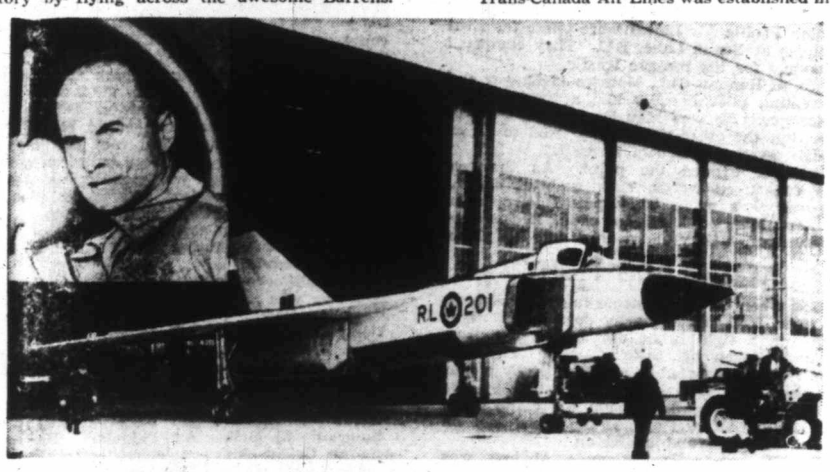
Next year the first oil prospectors were flying into the north, and the Canadian Air Force got its prefix "Royal."

In the summer of 1925 C. S. Caldwell and Scott Williams flew what was thought to be the first prospecting flight into the Liard River country and the Yukon. And at about the same time authority to build the first Avro aircraft in Canada was granted.

By 1928 there were half a dozen companies manufacturing aircraft in the country and C. H. "Punch" Dickens had made Canadian aviation history by flying across the awesome Barrens.



This is the Orenda-engined Sabre jet, known as "top dog" in NATO's European defence force in the past, and a match for any enemy in its prime.



Avro's Arrow, designed to succeed the Sabre, now scrapped by the Canadian government after a colossal investment in plant, prototypes and equipment. Inset is Jan Zurakowski, the test pilot who drove the big machine at speeds in excess of 1,500 knots.

Then, in 1930, Canadian National and Canadian Pacific Railways formed Canadian Airways Ltd., air mail contracts were assuming sizeable proportions and the prospect of widespread passenger travel was bright.

Victoria had come into the commercial aviation picture two or three years previous, with Hunter Wells inaugurating a Vancouver-Victoria run, and Gordon McKenzie as his pilot. The six-passenger Fairchild made 5,000 trips before the service was ended with Wells' death.

In 1928 a group of Victorians, including Cecil and Ernie Eve and James H. Beatty, formed the B.C. Airways, purchased a big Ford tri-motor passenger aircraft, and started a service to Seattle. In 19 days the company took $10,000 in fares—and then disaster.

Pilot Herald Walker and co-pilot Louis Carson, a Victoria boy, were aloft with four passengers to Seattle, approaching Dungeness in fog and presumably flying low. No one knows what actually occurred, but it is assumed a wing tip touched the sea and the aircraft plunged into the water.

The depression of 1932 set back all aviation plans, commercial and military. A fifth of the RCAF personnel was dismissed. And federal appropriations were slashed 67 per cent to a parsimonious $1,750,000. War, although few suspected it, was only six years away.

Trans-Canada Air Lines was established in 1937 and inaugurated Vancouver-Seattle schedules in September. The first transcontinental airmail service came the following year.

With the beginning of war, Canadian firms tooled up for the manufacture of fighter aircraft, including the famous Hurricane, later Mosquitoes, and for the next few years industry was preoccupied with production of military aircraft. However, Canadian Pacific Air Lines was organized in 1940, for trans-Atlantic ferrying on a non-profit contract. It was not until 1942 that Canadian Pacific Air Lines was operating commercially.

The RCAF reached its peak of strength in 1945 with 215,000 men and 45 operational squadrons in Europe and Asia.

Canada was accepted as the fourth greatest air power in the world!

A. V. Roe Canada Ltd. was established in 1945 and was to assume a dominant position in the industry, culminating with the development of the Arrow. Meanwhile, it had produced the first jet airliner built in North America, and the RCAF contracted for design and manufacture of the famous Orenda turbojet engines to the company.

DeHavilland of Canada was another important supplier to the RCAF, delivering jet Vampires. Canadair Ltd. of Montreal, now General Dynamics Corporation, delivered the first North Stars to TCA in 1947, and later in the same year the RCAF received its initial delivery of the same distinguished aircraft.

In the next nine years Canadian-built airplanes won themselves enviable reputations. The North Stars were setting records. A. V. Roe's CF-100 jet, Canadair Sabres, and then the sabre with Orenda (A. V. Roe) power, boosted the RCAF's reputation to the point where its squadrons with NATO were recognized as the most effective combat jets.

There is no place in this story for argument about the future of the Canadian aircraft industry. There is no point in laboring the fact that in a few short years this nation has taken its place among the most advanced in the military and civil aviation field. But enough has been said to indicate the immense advances that have been made since that afternoon in 1909 when McCurdy became the first Canadian to make the first flight from Canadian soil.

John McCurdy is still keenly interested in the industry. Living at Montreal, and an honorary commodore of the RCAF, he has participated and will continue to take part in celebrations of the anniversary of his notable contribution to aviation.

McCurdy didn't make his first flight in Canada. After he became associated with Alexander Bell in 1907, he drew into the group other young men of vision, F. W. Baldwin, Glenn Curtiss and Thomas Selfridge of the U.S. Army. They built their first aircraft at Hammondsport, New York, made their first flights there, after they had trained by leaping into space suspended from a kite, controlling its flight by the swinging of their bodies.

The Silver Dart in which McCurdy made the first flight from Canadian soil had already been proved before it was shipped to Baddeck on Cape Breton Island.

McCurdy set all sorts of records, from the speed mark established in a Curtiss biplane in 1910 to the distance over water achievement from Florida Keys to Havana.

He was not alone among Canadian pioneers of the time, of course. In Victoria, in 1910, for example, the first successful aircraft engine was built by W. W. Gibson. It was fitted to the Gibson Twin aircraft, and flew successfully in September of that year.

But McCurdy was doing the romantic job. His was the skill that started Canadian airmen soaring into the distances that helped develop the nation in the early air age.